

McCollom's Feb '81

SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH.

BY CLARA MORRIS.



IN glancing back over two crowded and busy seasons, one figure stands out with clearness and beauty. In his case only (so far as my personal knowledge goes), there was nothing derogatory to dignity or to manhood in being called beautiful, for he was that bud of splendid promise blasted to the core, before its full triumphant blooming—known to the world as a madman and an assassin, but to the profession as “that unhappy boy”—John Wilkes Booth.

He was so young, so bright, so gay—so kind. I could not have known him well; of course, too—there are two or three different people in every man's skin; yet when we remember that stars are not generally in the habit of showing their brightest, their best side to the company at rehearsal, we cannot help feeling both respect and liking for the one who does.

There are not many men who can receive a gash over the eye in a scene at night, without at least a momentary outburst of temper; but when the combat between Richard and Richmond was being rehearsed, Mr. Booth had again and again urged Mr. McCollom (that six-foot tall and handsome leading-man, who entrusted me with the care of his watch during such encounters) to come on hard! to come on hot! hot, old fellow! harder—faster! He'd take the chance of a blow—if only they could make a hot fight of it!

And Mr. McCollom, who was a cold man, at night became nervous in his effort to act like a fiery one—he forgot he had struck the full number of head blows, and when Booth was pantingly expecting a thrust, McCollom, wielding his sword with both hands, brought it down with awful force fair across Booth's forehead; a cry of horror rose, for in one moment his face was masked in blood, one eyebrow was cleanly cut through—there came simultaneously one deep groan from Richard and the exclamation: “Oh, good God! good God!” from Richmond, who stood shaking like a leaf and staring at his work. Then Booth, flinging the blood from his eyes

with his left hand, said as genially as man could speak: “That's all right, old man! never mind me—only come on hard, for God's sake, and save the fight!”

Which he resumed at once, and though he was perceptibly weakened, it required the sharp order of Mr. Ellsler, to “ring the first curtain bell,” to force him to bring the fight to a close, a single blow shorter than usual. Then there was a running to and fro, with ice and vinegar-paper and raw steak and raw oysters. When the doctor had placed a few stitches where they were most required, he laughingly declared there was provision enough in the room to start a restaurant. Mr. McCollom came to try to apologize—to explain, but Booth would have none of it; he held out his hand, crying: “Why, old fellow, you look as if *you* had lost the blood. Don't worry—now if my eye had gone, that *would* have been bad!” and so with light words he tried to set the unfortunate man at ease, and though he must have suffered much mortification as well as pain from the eye—that in spite of all endeavors would blacken—he never made a sign.

He was, like his great elder brother, rather lacking in height, but his head and throat, and the manner of their rising from his shoulders, were truly beautiful. His coloring was unusual—the ivory pallor of his skin, the inky blackness of his densely thick hair, the heavy lids of his glowing eyes were all Oriental, and they gave a touch of mystery to his face when it fell into gravity—but there was generally a flash of white teeth behind his silky moustache, and a laugh in his eyes.

One thing I shall never cease to admire him for. When a man has placed a clean and honest name in his wife's care for life, about the most stupidly wicked use she can make of it is as a signature to a burst of amatory flattery addressed to an unknown actor—who will despise her for her trouble. Some women may shrivel as though attacked with “peach-leaf curl,” when they hear how these silly letters are sometimes passed about and laughed at. “No gentleman would so betray a confidence!” Of course not; but once, when I made that remark to an actor, who was then flaunting the food his vanity fed

upon, he roughly answered: "And no *lady* would so address an unknown man—she cast away her right to respectful consideration when she thrust that letter in the box." That was brutal; but there are those who think like him this very day, and oh, foolish tamperers with fire—who act like him!

Now it is scarcely exaggeration to say the sex was in love with John Booth—the name Wilkes being apparently unknown to his family and close friends. At depot restaurants those fiercely unwilling maiden slammers of the plates and shooters of coffee cups made to him swift and gentle offerings of hot steaks, hot biscuits, hot coffee—crowding about him like doves about a grain basket, leaving other travelers to wait upon themselves or go without refreshment. At the hotels maids had been known to enter his room and tear asunder the already made-up bed, that the "turn-over" might be broader by a thread or two, and both pillows slant at the perfectly correct angle. At the theater—good heaven! as the sunflowers turn upon their stalks to follow the beloved sun, so, old or young—our faces smiling—turned to him. Yes, old or young; for the little daughter of the manager, who played but the Duke of York in "Richard III," came to the theater each day, each night of the engagement, arrayed in her best gowns, and turned on him fervid eyes that might well have served for Juliet. The manager's wife, whose sternly aggressive virtue no one could doubt or question, with aid of art waved and fluffed her hair, and softened thus her too hard line of brow, and let her keen black eyes fill with friendly sparkles for us all—yet, 'twas because of him. And when the old woman made to threaten him with her finger, and he caught her lifted hand and, uncovering his bonnie head, stooped and kissed it—then came the wanton blood up in her cheek, as she had been a girl again.

His letters then from flirtatious women, and alas! girls, you may well believe were legion; a cloud used to gather upon his face at sight of them. I have, of course, no faintest idea that he lived the godly, righteous, and sober life that is enjoined upon us all, but I do remember with respect that this idolized man, when the letters were many and rehearsal already on, would carefully cut off every signature and utterly destroy them, then pile the unread letters up and—I don't know what their final end was, but he remarked with knit brows as he caught

me watching him at his work one morning: "They," pointing to the pile of mutilated letters, "they are harmless now, little one—their sting lies in the tail!" and when a certain free-and-easy actor laughingly picked up a very elegantly written note, and said: "I can read it, can't I, now the signature is gone?" he answered, shortly: "The woman's folly is no excuse for our knavery—lay the letter down, please!"

I played the "Player-Queen" to my great joy, and in the "Marble Heart" I was one of the group of three statues in the first act. We were supposed to represent Lais, Aspasia, and Phryne, and when we read the cast I glanced at the other girls (we were not strikingly handsome) and remarked, gravely: "Well, it's a comfort to know that we look so like the three beautiful Grecians."

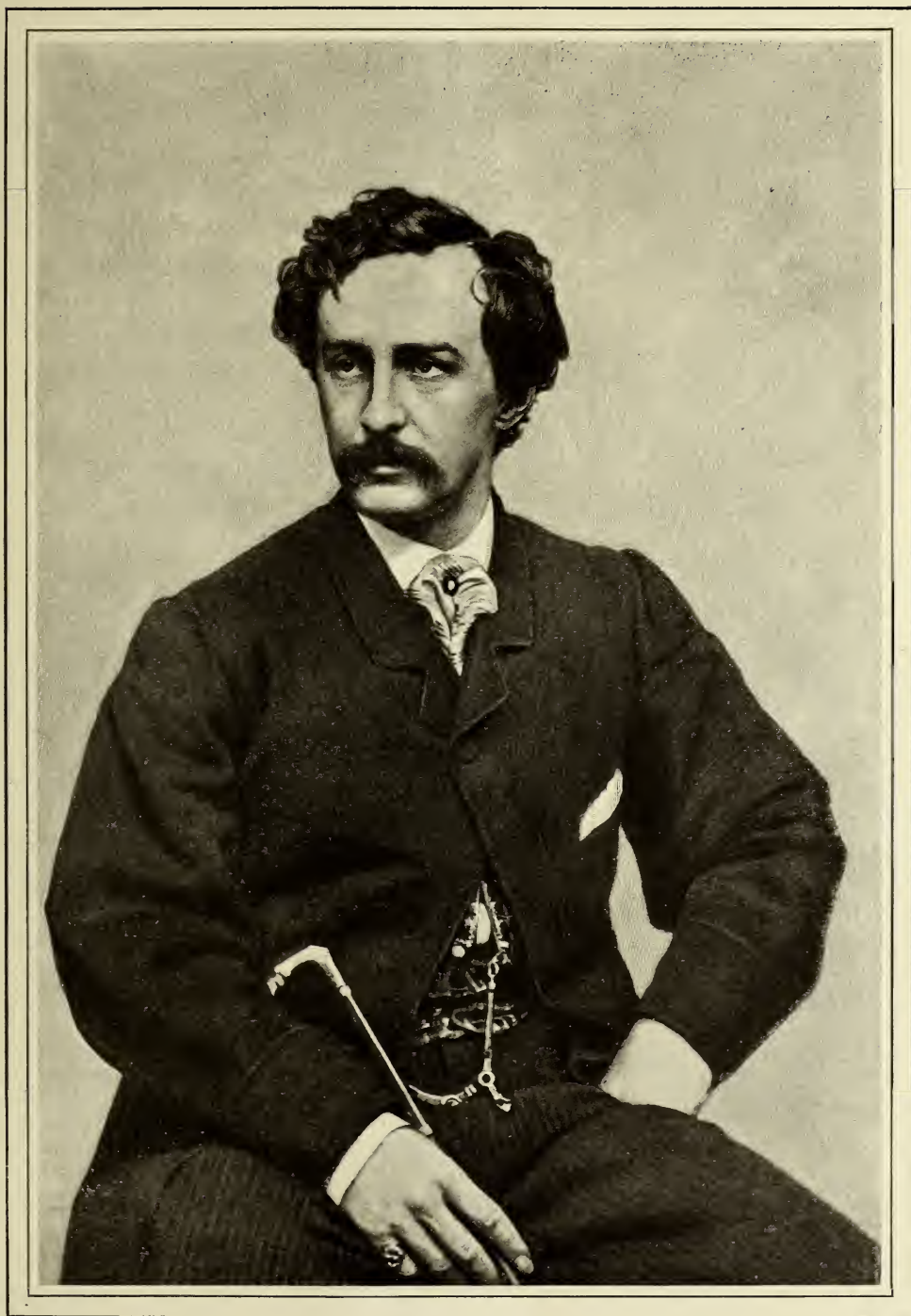
A laugh at our backs brought us around suddenly to face Mr. Booth, who said to me: "You satirical little wretch, how do you come to know these Grecian ladies? Perhaps you have the advantage of them in being all beautiful within?"

"I wish it would strike outward then," I answered. "You know it's always best to have things come to the surface!"

"I know some very precious things are hidden from common sight; and I know, too, you caught my meaning in the first place. Good night!" and he left us.

We had been told to descend to the stage at night with our white robes hanging free and straight, that Mr. Booth himself might drape them as we stood upon the pedestal. It really is a charming picture—that of the statues in the first act. Against a backing of black velvet the three white figures, carefully posed, strongly lighted, stand out so marble-like that when they slowly turn their faces and point to their chosen master, the effect is uncanny enough to chill the looker-on.

Well, with white wigs, white tights, and white robes, and half strangled with the powder we had inhaled in our efforts to make our lips stay white, we cautiously descended the stairs—we dared not talk, we dared not blink our eyes, for fear of disturbing the coat of powder—we were lifted to the pedestal and took our places as we expected to stand. Then Mr. Booth came—such a picture in his Greek garments as made even the men exclaim at him—and began to pose us. It happened one of us had very good limbs, one medium good, and the third had, apparently, walked on broom-sticks. When Mr.



JOHN WILKES BOOTH.

From a photograph in the possession of Miss Clara Morris.

Booth slightly raised the drapery of No. 3 his features gave a twist as though he had suddenly tasted lemon-juice, but quick as a flash he said: "I believe I'll advance you to the center for the stately and wise Aspasia,"—the central figure wore her draperies hanging straight to her feet, hence the "advance" and consequent concealment of the unlovely limbs. It was quickly and kindly done, for the girl was not only spared mortification, but in the word "advance" she saw a compliment and was happy accordingly. Then my turn came. My arms were placed about Aspasia, my head bent and turned and twisted—my right hand curved upon my breast so that the forefinger touched my chin—I felt I was a personified simper; but I was silent and patient, until the arrangement of my draperies began—then I squirmed anxiously.

"Take care—take care!" he cautioned. "You will sway the others if you move!" But in spite of the risk of my marble make-up I faintly groaned: "Oh dear! must it be like that?"

Regardless of the pins in the corner of his mouth he burst into laughter, and, taking a photograph from the bosom of his Greek shirt, he said: "I expected a protest from you, Miss, so I came prepared—don't move your head, but just look at this."

He held the picture of a group of statuary up to me. "This is you on the right. It's not so dreadful; now, is it?" And I cautiously murmured: "That if I wasn't any worse than that I wouldn't mind."

And so we were all satisfied, and our statue scene was very successful. Next morning I saw Mr. Booth come running out of the theater on his way to the telegraph office at the corner, and right in the middle of the walk, staring about him, stood a child—a small roamer of the stony streets, who had evidently got far enough beyond his native ward to arouse misgivings as to his personal safety, and at the very moment he stopped to consider matters Mr. Booth dashed out of the stage-door and added to his bewilderment by capsizing him completely.

"Oh, good lord! Baby, are you hurt?" exclaimed Mr. Booth, pausing instantly to pick up the dirty, tousled small heap and stand it on its bandy legs again.

"Don't cry, little chap!" And the aforesaid little chap not only ceased to cry, but gave him a damp and grimy smile, at which the actor bent towards him quickly, but paused, took out his handkerchief, and first carefully wiping the dirty little nose and

mouth, stooped and kissed him heartily, put some change in each freckled paw, and continued his run to the telegraph office.

He knew of no witness to the act. To kiss a pretty, clean child under the approving eyes of mamma might mean nothing but politeness, but surely it required the prompting of a warm and tender heart to make a young and thoughtless man feel for and caress such a dirty, forlorn bit of babyhood as that.

Of his work I suppose I was too young and too ignorant to judge correctly, but I remember well hearing the older members of the company express their opinions. Mr. Ellsler, who had been on terms of friendship with the elder Booth, was delighted with the promise of his work. He greatly admired Edwin's intellectual power, his artistic care; but "John," he cried, "has more of the old man's power in one performance than Edwin can show in a year. He has the fire, the dash, the touch of strangeness. He often produces unstudied effects at night. I question him: 'Did you rehearse that business to-day, John?' He answers: 'No; I didn't rehearse it, it just came to me in the scene and I couldn't help doing it, but it went all right, didn't it?' Full of impulse just now, like a colt, his heels are in the air nearly as often as his head, but wait a year or two till he gets used to the harness and quiets down a bit, and you will see as great an actor as America can produce!"

And by the way, speaking of Mr. Ellsler and the elder Booth, I am reminded that I have in my possession a letter from the latter to the former. It is written in a rather cramped hand that carries the address and the marks of the red wafers, as that was before the appearance of envelopes, and it informs Mr. Ellsler that he, "Junius Brutus Booth, will play a star engagement of one week"—for the sum of how many dollars? If it were not unguessable I should insist upon your guessing, but that would not be fair, so here it is: "for the sum of \$300;" and wants to know, "How many and what plays he is desired to do that he may select his wardrobe."

Think of it—the mighty father of our Edwin asking but \$300 for a week of such acting as he could do, which, if this bright, light-hearted boy was so much like him, must have been brilliant indeed.

One morning, going on the stage where a group were talking with John Wilkes, I heard him say: "No; oh, no! There's but one Hamlet to my mind—that's my brother

Edwin. You see, between ourselves, he is Hamlet—melancholy and all!”

That was an awful time, when the dread news came to us. We were in Columbus, Ohio. We had been horrified by the great crime at Washington. My room-mate and I had, from our small earnings, bought some black cotton at a tripled price, as all the black material in the city was not sufficient to meet the demand; and as we tacked it about our one window, a man passing told us the assassin had been discovered, and that he was the actor Booth. Hattie laughed so she nearly swallowed the tack that, girl-like, she held between her lips, and I, after a laugh, told him it was a poor subject for a jest, and we went in. There was no store in Columbus then where play-books were sold, and as Mr. Ellsler had a very large and complete stage library, he frequently lent his books to us, and we would hurriedly copy out our lines and return the book for his own use. On that occasion he was going to study his part first and then leave the play with us as he passed, going home. We heard his knock. I was busy pressing a bit of stage finery. Hattie opened the door, and then I heard her exclaiming: “Why—why—what!” I turned quickly. Mr. Ellsler was coming slowly into the room. He is a very dark man, but he was perfectly livid then—his lips even were blanched to the whiteness of his cheeks. His eyes were dreadful, they were so glassy and seemed so unseeing. He was devoted to his children, and all I could think of as likely to bring such a look upon his face was disaster to one of them, and I cried, as I drew a chair to him: “What is it? Oh, what has happened to them?”

He sank down—he wiped his brow—he looked almost stupidly at me; then, very faintly, he said: “You—haven’t—heard—anything?”

Like a flash Hattie’s eyes and mine met. We thought of the supposed ill-timed jest of the stranger. My lips moved wordlessly. Hattie stammered: “A man—he—lied though—said that Wi-lkes Boo-th—but he did lie—didn’t he?” and in the same faint voice Mr. Ellsler answered slowly: “No—no! he did not lie—it’s true!”

Down fell our heads, and the waves of shame and sorrow seemed fairly to overwhelm us; and while our sobs filled the little room, Mr. Ellsler rose and laid two play-books on the table. Then, while standing there, staring into space, I heard his far, faint voice saying: “So great—so good a

man destroyed, and by the hand of that unhappy boy! my God! my God!” He wiped his brow again and slowly left the house, apparently unconscious of our presence.

When we resumed our work—the theater had closed because of the national calamity—many a painted cheek showed runnels made by bitter tears, and one old actress, with quivering lips, exclaimed: “One woe doth tread upon another’s heels, so fast they follow!” but with no thought of quoting, and God knows, the words expressed the situation perfectly.

Mrs. Ellsler, whom I never saw shed a tear for any sickness, sorrow, or trouble of her own, shed tears for the mad boy, who had suddenly become the assassin of God’s anointed—the great, the blameless Lincoln.

We crept about, quietly. Every one winced at the sound of the overture. It was as if one dead lay within the walls—one who belonged to us.

When the rumors about Booth being the murderer proved to be authentic, the police feared a possible outbreak of mob feeling, and a demonstration against the theater building, or against the actors individually; but we had been a decent, law-abiding, well-behaved people—liked and respected—so we were not made to suffer for the awful act of one of our number. Still, when the mass-meeting was held in front of the Capitol, there was much anxiety on the subject, and Mr. Ellsler urged all the company to keep away from it, lest their presence might arouse some ill-feeling. The crowd was immense, the sun had gloomed over, and the Capitol building, draped in black, loomed up with stern severity and that massive dignity only attained by heavily columned buildings. The people surged like waves about the speakers’ stand, and the policemen glanced anxiously toward the not far away new theater, and prayed that some bombastic, revengeful ruffian might not crop up from this mixed crowd of excited humanity to stir them to violence.

Three speakers, however, in their addresses had confined themselves to eulogizing the great Dead. In life Mr. Lincoln had been abused by many—in death he was worshiped by all; and these speakers found their words of love and sorrow eagerly listened to, and made no harsh allusions to the profession from which the assassin sprang. And then an unknown man clambered up from the crowd to the portico platform and began to speak, without asking any one’s permission.

He had a far-reaching voice—he had fire and “go.”

“Here’s the fellow to look out for!” said the policemen; and, sure enough, suddenly the dread word “theater” was tossed into the air, and every one was still in a moment, waiting for—what? I don’t know what they hoped for—I do know what many feared; but this is what he said: “Yes, look over at our theater and think of the little body of men and women there, who are to-day sore-hearted and cast down; who feel that they are looked at askant, because one of their number has committed that hideous crime! Think of what they have to bear of shame and horror, and spare for them, too, a little pity!”

He paused. It had been a bold thing to do—to appeal for consideration for actors at such a time. The crowd swayed for a moment to and fro, a curious growling came from it, and then all heads turned toward the theater. A faint cheer was given, and afterwards there was not the slightest allusion made to us—and verily we were grateful.

That the homely, tender-hearted “Father Abraham”—rare combination of courage, justice, and humanity—died at an actor’s hand, will be a grief, a horror, and a shame to the profession forever; yet I cannot believe that John Wilkes Booth was “the leader of a band of bloody conspirators”!

Who shall draw a line and say: here

genius ends and madness begins? There was that touch of—strangeness. In Edwin it was a profound melancholy; in John it was an exaggeration of spirit—almost a wildness. There was the natural vanity of the actor, too, who craves a dramatic situation in real life. There was his passionate love and sympathy for the South—why, he was “easier to be played on than a pipe.”

Undoubtedly he conspired to kidnap the President—that would appeal to him; but after that I truly believe he was a tool—certainly he was no leader. Those who led him knew his courage, his belief in Fate, his loyalty to his friends; and, because they knew these things, he drew the lot, as it was meant he should from the first. Then, half mad, he accepted the part Fate cast him for—committed the monstrous crime, and paid the awful price. And since

“God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform,”

we venture to pray for His mercy upon the guilty soul who may have repented and confessed his manifold sins and offences during those awful hours of suffering before the end came.

And “God shutteth not up His mercies forever in displeasure!” We can only shiver and turn our thoughts away from the bright light that went out in such utter darkness. Poor, guilty, unhappy John Wilkes Booth!

HOME.

BY PAUL KESTER.

I WANT to go home
To the dull old town
With the shaded streets
And the open square
And the hill
And the flats
And the house I love
And the paths I know—
I want to go home.
If I can’t go back
To the happy days,
Yet I can live
Where their shadows lie,
Under the trees
And over the grass—
I want to be there
Where the joy was once.
Oh, I want to go home,
I want to go home.